

Second Presbyterian Church

Preliminary Summary of Information
March 1, 1976

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
1936 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Dates of construction: 1872-74; partial reconstruction,
1900-01

Architects: James Renwick and John Addison of Renwick and
Sands, New York (original building); Howard
Van Doren Shaw (reconstruction)

The Second Presbyterian Church, organized in 1842, has occupied the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Cullerton Street since 1872. The handsome limestone Gothic revival structure originally stood amidst the mansions that from the late 1860s through the 1920s lined Michigan, Indiana, Prairie, and Calumet avenues in the area immediately south of Sixteenth Street. At that time, the congregation included many of the families who occupied these mansions. Among the members were the Glessners, the Pullmans, the Armours, the Reids, the Kelloggs, the Crerars, the Blackstones, the Ishams, and the Cobbs. One of the architects of the church, Howard Van Doren Shaw, was also a member, as was Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, whose son, Robert Todd Lincoln, was a trustee from 1879 to 1889. Today, Second Presbyterian Church stands as an imposing reminder of this period of Prairie Avenue history, although it is a rather isolated landmark in an area that is mostly commercial and industrial. The church stands close by the proposed Prairie Avenue Historic District and it is hoped that the creation of that district, together with the development of new housing, will result in a rebirth of Chicago's Near South Side.

History of the Second Presbyterian Church

The Second Presbyterian Church traces its beginnings to June, 1833, when Chicago's original Presbyterian church was organized under the pastorate of the Rev. Jeremiah Porter. This church held services for a time in Fort Dearborn and in a cabin on Wolf Point. Soon a meeting house was built

near what is now the southwest corner of Lake and Clark streets. Dedicated on January 4, 1834, this structure was Chicago's first Protestant church building. The primitive frame structure was about forty feet by twenty-five feet in size, and had plastered walls, bare puncheon (roughly finished wooden) floors, and pine board benches. The building cost \$600.

In 1835, the members of the congregation formally incorporated as The First Presbyterian Church and Society of Chicago, and within the next five years the church building was moved to the west side of Clark Street south of Washington Street, and was twice enlarged.

The Church Splits

In 1842, the congregation split over the issue of slavery. The uncompromising abolitionists remained in the First Presbyterian Church. Other members of the congregation opposed slavery but felt that it was morally justifiable for slave owners to keep the slaves they already had; they further believed that it would be wrong to free all slaves suddenly without making provisions for their future. This group split from the First Presbyterian Church and organized the Second Presbyterian Church on June 1, 1842.

The Second Presbyterian Church Grows

At first the services of the Second Presbyterian Church were held in a commercial structure, known as the Saloon Building, at Clark and Lake streets. In 1843, the congregation built a one-story frame building on the south side of Randolph Street between Clark and Dearborn streets (where the Civic Center now stands). It was soon necessary to enlarge this building to accommodate the growing congregation. The building was sawed in half and twenty extra feet were inserted. In 1847, twelve feet were added to the length.

That same year, the congregation purchased a 96- by 171-foot lot at the northeast corner of Wabash Avenue and Washington Street for \$5,000, and prepared to build a new church. Dissatisfied with the plans submitted by a Chicago architect,

the building committee asked one of its members to consult some of the leading architects in the East. One of the most prominent church architects of the day, and one of America's foremost Gothic revival architects, was James Renwick of New York City.

Renwick had been born in New York City on November 11, 1818, and was the son of James Renwick, Sr., an architect, engineer, and professor at Columbia University. Young Renwick graduated from Columbia in 1836 and joined the engineering staff of the Erie Railroad. Early in life Renwick had developed an interest in architecture, and in 1843 friends encouraged him to submit plans to a competition for a new Grace Episcopal Church at Broadway and Tenth Street in New York. Renwick's design for a Gothic revival structure, inspired by Richard Upjohn's Trinity Church at Broadway and Wall Street, won first prize in the competition. The church was completed in 1846 and is generally regarded as one of the finest examples of Gothic revival architecture in this country.

Having achieved renown as the architect of New York's wealthiest and most fashionable church, and aided by his family's social prominence, Renwick was soon receiving many important commissions. During the early years of his practice, Renwick was primarily a designer of churches. Among these are Calvary Episcopal, All Saints', St. Bartholomew, and the Church of the Covenant, all located in New York. His best-known church is St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York (built between 1859 and 1879).

Later in his career, Renwick designed several large and luxurious residences in New York City; Staten Island, N.Y.; Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.; and Newport, R.I. He also designed the original building of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (1848-49); the Corcoran Gallery, also in Washington (1859); and several buildings, including the Main Hall, for Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. (1860).

At about the same time that he was designing the Smithsonian Institution, Renwick received the commission for Second Presbyterian Church. Asher Carter supervised construction in Chicago.

The cornerstone of the impressive Gothic revival structure

was laid in August, 1849, and in January, 1851, the church was dedicated. The limestone used in the construction of the building was heavily spotted with black as a result of a bituminous deposit in the quarry from which it came. Recalling the building in 1883, Chicago architect William LeBaron Jenney said that these spots gave the church a "very untidy appearance." As a result of the spots, the church on Wabash Avenue became known as the "Spotted Church" and the "Church of the Holy Zebra."

It soon became apparent to the congregation that the ever-expanding business center of the city was not the most desirable location for a church. In the summer of 1871, the property for which the congregation had paid \$5,000 in 1847 was sold for \$161,000, and a new lot was purchased at the corner of Wabash Avenue and Twentieth (now Cullerton) Street.

In September, 1871, the Olivet Presbyterian Church united with the Second Presbyterian Church. Just a few weeks later, the Chicago Fire destroyed the "Spotted Church." The limestone from the burned-out structure eventually found its way to Lake Forest, Illinois, where it was used in the construction of the Presbyterian church and the college chapel.

After the fire of 1871, it looked as though Wabash Avenue would become a commercial street as far south as Twenty-Second Street; consequently, the congregation exchanged its new lot at Wabash Avenue and Twentieth Street for its present property on Michigan Avenue. For its new church, the congregation again went to Renwick. Renwick's office was now known as Renwick and Sands, Joseph Sands having been taken into partnership in the early 1870s. John Addison of the firm collaborated in the design and was sent to Chicago to superintend construction.

The cornerstone of the present church was laid on September 21, 1872. The first services were held in the Sunday School room of the new building on January 5, 1873, and the first service in the main sanctuary of the church took place on November 30 of that same year. In 1884, the bell tower was completed and a single great bell installed.

The church building is approximately sixty feet high, or the

equivalent of a six-story building. Its exterior dimensions are 110 by 168 feet, and the nave measures about 72 by 116 feet. The original balconies have been enlarged, giving the church a seating capacity of about 1,200.

The Exterior of the Second Presbyterian Church

Although the church is far less Gothic in appearance since the reconstruction work done after a fire on March 9, 1900, the main features of its Gothic revival exterior remain.

A four-story, square bell tower, supported by buttresses at its four corners, visually anchors the imposing edifice to the corner on which it stands. The tower was originally topped by a graceful spire with a tall, slender finial, but these were lost due to wind damage in 1929. The belfry is open on all four sides; each side contains two narrow pointed arches supported on slender pillars and set within a larger pointed arch. Under the larger arch a figure of an angel projects from a round niche--a different figure projects from each side of the tower. At the base of the belfry a gargoyle projects from each corner of the tower; these gargoyles no longer function as water spouts but do contribute to the Gothic character of the structure. Below the belfry are pairs of tall, narrow lancet windows, the lights supported by neo-Gothic wood tracery.

The nave facade has one wide portal at its center. Here, handsomely carved double doors are set within a Gothic arch, which in turn is set within a tall, pointed stone frame. At the peak of this stone frame is a sculpted head of Christ. Flanking the portal are Gothic-arched windows of stained glass, set within pointed stone frames marked by grotesque figures typical of Gothic design. Immediately above the doors are three lights of art glass. Above the portal level is a row of five narrow Gothic-arched windows of stained-glass. Above them, just below the gable of the nave, is a large stained-glass window set within a pointed segmental arch. In a niche directly above this is a relief sculpture of a vine, an iconographical symbol of Christ. Projecting from round niches at its sides are the symbols of the four Gospels: a young man (Matthew), a lion (Mark), an ox (Luke), and an eagle (John).

Buttressing the north facade of the nave is a tall stone

pier weighted with a pinnacle that once was topped by a tall finial. Adjoining this pier is the shorter gabled facade of the nave's north side aisle, similarly buttressed.

The north and south exterior walls of the nave are each punctuated by three continuous rows of windows. The opalescent windows of the clerestory (the upper part of the wall that separates the nave from the aisles) are framed in copper that has acquired a green patina. Beneath the clerestory is a row of six large, Gothic-arched windows of stained glass (with the exception of one art-glass window on the north side), separated by buttresses. Beneath each of these windows are three small windows (except on the south wall where one large stained-glass window was extended down to the floor of the nave); these windows are of art glass.

The north side of the church is brick, not limestone, and the windows at ground level are obscured by a one-story addition which now serves as a church school.

West of the nave is a projecting transverse section with a buttressed street facade similar in appearance to the portal section of the Michigan Avenue facade. In the gable of the west facade of this projecting section is a wheel window faced with wood; in the east wall is a graceful oriel with copper trim that has acquired a patina. This section of the church contains the minister's office; a large Fellowship Hall, which contains four of the church's original chandeliers and the pulpit and two platform chairs from the pre-Chicago Fire building; and a second-floor gymnasium.

The limestone blocks of the exterior came from a prairie quarry a few miles away which also contained a bituminous deposit that stained much of the stone, accounting for its black spots. Blocks with heavy, even markings were laid in bands to form stringcourses at various levels, and were also used around the window arches and on the tops of the buttresses. Elsewhere dark spots give the walls a mottled look.

Alterations

Substantial alterations have been made to the church structure since the completion of the bell tower in 1884. After a fire destroyed the roof and much of the interior of the nave in 1900, the congregation engaged the well-known Chicago architect Howard Van Doren Shaw and the noted Chicago artist Frederick Clay Bartlett to reconstruct and redesign the interior.

Shaw was a native Chicagoan. Born in 1869, he graduated from Yale in 1890 and then studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for two years. He traveled extensively in Europe and the Orient before returning to Chicago in 1895 to join the firm of Jenney and Mundie. He apparently reacted against the severely disciplined architecture of Jenney's office, and in 1897 opened his own office in the attic of his father's house on Calumet Avenue. He later moved to an office downtown.

Because of his family's social position and his own Eastern education Shaw was a member of a social elite in Chicago at that time. This helped him acquire many commissions. Among his works are the Fourth Presbyterian Church, the Disciples of Christ Church in Hyde Park, the Quadrangle Club at the University of Chicago, the main building of the Donnelley Printing Company, and McKinlock Court and the Goodman Theatre at the Art Institute. He also designed many elaborate residences on the North Shore for prominent Chicago families, including the Ryersons, the Swifts, and the Donnelleys.

Shaw's reconstruction of the Second Presbyterian made the building less Gothic than the original church by Renwick. For example, the roof of the nave of the original structure was more sharply pitched and its peak considerably higher. There was a rose window in the east wall of the nave. Inside, the tall Gothic arches along the sides of the nave were supported on slender cast-iron columns with foliate capitals. The side balconies were also supported by these graceful columns, but were set behind them. The high vaulting of the nave terminated at the west end in a vault filled with organ pipes arranged in an elaborate design of pointed arches. Most of this interior was light in color and airy in feeling.

In his reconstruction, Shaw made considerable use of dark oak paneling, heavy oak beams, and plaster ornament on the interior. The height of the arches along the sides of the nave was reduced, and their slender iron columns were sheathed in steel for additional strength, and then enclosed in thick rectangular pillars of brick covered with plaster and wood paneling. The side balconies were extended out about six feet beyond these columns. These and other changes, including the lowered and less steeply pitched roof, give the interior a flatter, broader, less ethereal appearance markedly different from the long, narrow, soaring look of the original nave.

Interior Artwork

The Second Presbyterian Church is most noted for its magnificent stained-glass windows and its fine frescoes. Outstanding among its collection of beautiful glasswork are the five small and one large window high in the east end of the nave. These windows are said to have been designed by Edward P. Sperry when he was employed in Louis C. Tiffany's famous glass and decorating firm in New York. These favrile glass (glass of delicate design with an iridescent surface) windows are unusually brilliant and catch the changing east light in a way that produces startling changes in the coloring.

Starting from the west end, the first window on the north side of the nave is a pastoral scene by the Tiffany company (the only window in the church that actually bears the Tiffany name in the glass). The second window, which depicts Peter being released from prison by an angel, is attributed to Chicago artist Louis J. Millet and Chicago architect George Robinson Dean. Millet, who taught for thirty years at the Art Institute, was a well-known muralist and a member of the firm of Healy and Millet, designers and manufacturers of stained glass and other forms of decorative art. The third window, by the Tiffany company, represents Jesus meeting John at the River Jordan. The fourth window, attributed to John LaFarge, shows an angel in a field of lilies. This window is said to have come from the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 and is remarkable for the great thickness of the layered glass forming the lilies. LaFarge was a well-known New York artist and designer of stained

glass, and was a rival of Louis C. Tiffany. LaFarge's round mosaic window for the main facade of the church was destroyed in the fire of 1900. The fifth window, known as the "Jeweled Window," is a Tiffany mosaic design. The sixth window is a rather commonplace one of art glass.

The first window on the south side of the nave, again starting at the west end, depicts Paul preaching to the Athenians. Made by the Tiffany company, this window is noteworthy for its illustrations of the Temple of Athena, the Parthenon, and the jeweled crown. The second window on the south side, attributed to the McCully and Miles Company of Chicago (although its designer is unknown), extends down to the floor of the nave and is done in various shades of green. It symbolizes the Twenty-Third Psalm. The third window on this side, by the Tiffany company, depicts two angels looking up to the Mount of the Holy Cross. The fourth is another mosaic window. The fifth, by the Tiffany company, is the last window on this side. It depicts "Christ Blessing the Little Children," and is done in tones of amber and red.

Several windows, including the fifth on the north side and the first and sixth on the south, were acquired from the First Presbyterian Church before it moved to Woodlawn from Twenty-first Street and Indiana Avenue in 1913. The first, fourth, and sixth windows on the north side and the second on the south are supported by geometric tracery of wood, whereas the other windows are supported by thin metal bands.

In the narthex, flanking the main portal, two small but important windows depict "Sancta Cecilia" and "Sancta Margarita." The St. Cecilia window is attributed to Edward Burne-Jones, an English painter and designer of stained glass. This window is similar to the center panel of his St. Cecilia window in Christ Church, Oxford, England. The St. Margaret window is also attributed to Burne-Jones, and both windows are said to have been executed by the famous nineteenth-century English firm of designers headed by William Morris. The glass is said to have come from a sixteenth-century church in Flanders. The windows were obtained for the church by Joseph Twyman, a Chicago architect, painter, and designer who was a disciple of Morris.

Much of the exquisite wood carving and all of the lamps and

chandeliers in the nave were apparently designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw. The four magnificent angels above the choir screen are the joint work of Shaw and Bartlett. Bartlett himself was responsible for the fine frescoes in the nave.

Frederick Clay Bartlett was born in Chicago on June 1, 1873. He was the son of Adolphus Clay Bartlett, a prominent hardware merchant who was a partner in the firm of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Company. Young Bartlett was educated at the Royal Academy of Art in Munich, Germany, and also studied art in Paris. He was a professional muralist; his works are to be found at the University of Chicago, the University Club, and the Fourth Presbyterian Church. He also did murals for the Council Chamber of Chicago's City Hall, but these are no longer there.

In the Second Presbyterian Church, Bartlett filled the back wall of the vault above the organ with a fresco depicting a choir of angels singing and playing instruments. Below them is the Rainbow of Hope, and beneath that is the Tree of Life. At either end of the choir stands an Angel of Peace with an olive branch. Bartlett's frescoes also decorate the soffits of the Gothic arches that line the sides of the nave above the balconies as well as the west end walls of the balconies. Depicted in these frescoes are angelic figures engaged in various activities. Religious symbols surround these figures and religious texts are incorporated into the design.

The Second Presbyterian Church has been designated a historic site by the Presbyterian Historical Society and has been listed by the Illinois Department of Conservation in the Illinois Register of Historic Places. On December 27, 1974, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.